

LIVING
AS AN
OVERCOMER

*ETERNAL MOTIVATION FOR
EARTHLY SUCCESS*



TONY EVANS

AUTHOR OF

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S NAMES

LIVING
AS AN
OVERCOMER

TONY EVANS



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INTRODUCTION

A CALL TO OVERCOME

Two of the premiere events in track and field are the high jump and pole vault, and both present the same challenge for the athletes: They're trying to hurl themselves over an elevated bar without knocking it down. A good male high jumper can propel himself over eight feet. A good male pole vaulter, on the other hand, can propel himself over 18 feet. The difference between the two is what they have to work with. The high jumper is totally dependent on his own leg strength, skill, stamina, and training to overcome the height of the bar. The pole vaulter, however, also uses a flexible pole to help hurl himself over the even greater height before him.

Our lives are full of all types of challenges seeking to defeat us—difficulties, problems, sin, circumstances, trials—and many Christians find themselves unable to deal with them. They come up short, knocking down the “bar” in front of them because their human effort, abilities, and strength are insufficient to transcend their trouble. They can't soar high enough on their own. So instead of enjoying the thrill of victory, they're constantly enduring the agony of defeat. They haven't done what's necessary to overcome.

The good news is that God, through the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, has given every believer the tools necessary to be

an overcomer. He has provided the position, power, and protocol we need to be victorious so we don't have to live perpetually defeated. Rather, victory is within our reach as we latch on to the One who has already overcome all on behalf of the world and each of us.

Sometimes we don't recognize God's provision, though. Or we get so caught up in our problems that we miss noticing His sovereign hand. That's why it's important to regularly study the Scriptures and learn from those who have gone before us. The Bible isn't just a collection of stories designed to make us feel good. Rather, it's the voice of God in print, and He uses the stories and principles in His Word for our benefit today. When we set out to study Scripture, there's always an application that relates to us both collectively and individually—as long as we ask God to reveal it.

Studying the seven churches Jesus addressed in the book of Revelation—located in the ancient cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—is no different. That's why I've produced this book and an accompanying small group video series based on sermons I preached at the church where I pastor. I want you to get to know each church individually and then allow the truths revealed concerning their members to help you live as an overcomer in your own church and in the world around you. In addition, I want you to understand how you will be rewarded in eternity as an overcomer.

All that is what *Living as an Overcomer* is about.

PART ONE

WHERE TO BEGIN

Before we dive into the messages Jesus sent to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, we need to understand some foundational concepts and answer some relevant questions. What is the key to becoming an overcomer? What is spiritual independence, and why is it so detrimental for us? What's special about the number seven we see over and over in Revelation? What does it mean to hear? Have we already overcome, or do we still need to overcome? There's more, but let's get started.





THE KEY TO OVERCOMING

We all have challenges to overcome—difficult circumstances, disturbing emotions, detrimental habits, or hard situations that hold us back. But to live as an overcomer is more about how to face these adversities than about avoiding them. Overcoming is not a blueprint to a daily utopia. Rather, it's a map for how to rise above the challenges thrown at us. Overcoming is not an event; it's a lifestyle. We live as an overcomer when the principles we examine in this book regularly operate in our heart and life. And when we live according to these principles, we're already victors by the power of Christ's kingdom authority.

But if that's true, why on earth do we seem to still be in a battle? And what keeps us from adopting the lifestyle of an overcomer?

SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE

The annual Independence Day celebration in our nation ushers in a time of rest, enjoyment, great food, and even greater displays of fireworks. But let's focus on another type of independence—what I call spiritual independence. If you have named Christ as your one and only God and Savior, you have declared independence from the

rule of sin and Satan over your life. You've been set free. As Colossians 1:13 tells us, "[God] rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son."

Having gained spiritual independence from the rule of Satan, you may be wondering why, then, it often feels like you're still in a battle. Just like the British didn't allow its American colonies to secure their freedom simply by asking for it or letting them just declare it, Satan is not about to let you go without putting up his opposition. He knows that if he lets you out from under his influence, you become dangerous to his agenda. Instead of his telling you what to do, you'll be telling him what you're going to do.

That doesn't sit well with Satan at all. Even though Jesus has legally, under His law, set you free from the reign of sin in your life, the devil doesn't want you to be experientially set free. It's one thing to have the status of freedom; it's another thing entirely to experience it. But the truth in God's Word can help you walk into the full realization and experience of spiritual freedom.

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John tells us how Jesus sent a message to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor, addressing this concept of complete spiritual freedom in multiple ways. And the number seven comes into play over and over again.

WHAT'S IN A NUMBER?

In the Bible, the number seven represents completeness and fullness as well as to signify perfection, and it comes up regularly throughout the book of Revelation:

- seven churches (1:4, 11, 20)
- seven golden lampstands (1:12-13, 20; 2:1)
- seven stars (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1)
- seven spirits (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6)

- seven lamps (4:5)
- seven seals (5:1, 5)
- seven horns (5:6)

These are just a few of the many mentions of seven in Revelation. And sometimes when that number is used in Scripture, it means something *hasn't* reached its full expression. So from these passages with messages to the seven churches, we can infer that Jesus wants them all to be complete, fulfilled, and not lacking. He gives each of them a unique message, yes, but also as though He's saying to them as a group, "If you overcome in these seven areas, you will have overcome completely and perfectly. You will be living out the complete and abundant life I came to supply rather than the life of defeat Satan offers" (see John 10:9-10).

Even though each of these churches had its own uniqueness, problems, pressures, and burdens, Jesus' messages to them were actually very much the same. And this is why even though each of you will approach this topic of overcoming with different needs and issues—emotional, physical, circumstantial, relational, financial, career-based, or anything else—the solution rests in the same concept.

And while the specificity of everyone's situation will need to be addressed differently, the overarching solution lies in this one approach for us all: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). There again, Jesus speaks to the "churches" as a whole.

WHAT IT MEANS TO HEAR

Seven times Christ says the same exact thing to these churches: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says." Every one of His messages—although each is addressed to a different group with a different set of problems—boils down to this same solution. Jesus

suggests that it's possible to have an ear and not hear. It's possible to read and study the Word and still not receive and understand the truth. He's saying that whoever has the capacity to receive the data ought to heed and apply it rather than just acknowledge it. Because hearing with the ear has as its goal the heeding and application of the truth.

We've all talked to people who hear our words yet don't hear our message. Jesus is saying to the person who has an external ear, "Hear the internal message of what the Spirit of God is saying." The church is made up of individual people, and so although Jesus has one message for the whole congregation, it's also for each person who has an ear. In other words, each individual must decide whether they'll personally pay attention to the message—really hear it—allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to them directly.

Attending church services or even a small group won't get the truth of God deep within your spirit. Only when you choose to really hear and apply His truth will the fruit of it—the ability to overcome—be made manifest in your life. It's this ability that moves you from "We *shall* overcome," the statement often heard during the height of the civil rights movement, to "We *have* overcome," the truth of God's Word for believers.

OVERCOMING—THE HAVE AND THE WILL

First John 5 emphasizes that we *have* overcome: "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (verses 4-5). So John is saying that we, victors in Christ because of our faith in Him, have already overcome. But the interesting thing is that more than once in the book of Revelation, he indicates that we *shall* overcome, using the word *will* (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12). Not *have*. *Will*. In other words, we still *need* to overcome.

So on one hand, then, you *have* overcome, yet on the other hand, you still *need* to overcome. We all do. Even though victory in Christ is already secured for us, in this life there will still be temptations and trials to overcome. Jesus Himself acknowledged this (John 16:33).

The Greek word used for “overcome” in this passage is *nikeo*. It means “to prevail” or “to win one’s cause.” It has to do with being victorious in the midst of and even through whatever difficult circumstances you’re facing. It assumes some challenge or adversity is seeking to defeat you. Thus, if you have something illegitimately holding you hostage—emotional, circumstantial, relational, spiritual, or physical—you can overcome it. That is, to prevail and come out as a victor in your life. To access the power available to you.

Life is a participatory experience, though, so we get to choose what power we tap into and what we overcome. God has made the *nikeo* available to us, but it’s up to us to live in a way that unleashes it in our life and situations.

And yet it’s possible to be an active participant in the church or call yourself a Christian and not live as an overcomer. God doesn’t force His overcoming power or His strength on us. He has given each of us free will. That’s why studying these seven churches and Jesus’ messages to them is so important. Their lessons can help us in overcoming our own difficulties and wrongly placed desires.

EXPERIENTIAL REALITY

We all know it’s possible for a couple to be married and yet not be happily married. In other words, their legal status isn’t equal to their present experience. A marriage license declares one thing is true, but their reality says something else entirely. Similarly, when John says we have overcome, he’s referring to our legal status under divine law. Christ has made every believer an overcomer legally, but that doesn’t mean that’s what we’re experiencing personally. If a person is unhappy

and married, that doesn't make them unmarried. It just makes them miserable while married. Likewise, if a person is a believer but living a defeated life, that doesn't make them not a Christian. It just makes them a defeated Christian.

So even though God has given you legal status in the heavenlies, your experiential reality might not line up accordingly. But the goal of spiritual growth—and our learning what we can in studying the seven churches Jesus addresses in Revelation—is making our legal status our experiential reality. To overcome experientially requires working out the power of God in our lives so that we experience it and the freedom it provides. To overcome means to overrule a sin or even an illegitimate set of circumstances.

And like the Supreme Court can overrule a lower court's judgment or a replay official can overrule a referee's call on the field, there is Someone who can overrule whatever is ruling you illegitimately. God has the final, overruling power. But it's up to you to tap into His power in order to live as an overcomer. So many believers have a legal relationship with God through salvation but fail to access His overarching power through an abiding relationship aligned under His rule. Thus, they live defeated by sin and circumstances.

The Bible makes it clear that to be an overcomer, a link must be made between your state and your standing, your position and your practice. What is legally true for you spiritually must also be what you experience relationally.

An example of such a gap is the difference between the Emancipation Proclamation and Juneteenth. Two and a half years passed between the legal issuance of the proclamation and the slaves in the Southwest states finally learning they were free. Even though they were legally free, they weren't literally free because the information regarding their freedom had not yet reached them. They couldn't act on the truth of that freedom.

The tragedy of Juneteenth, though, is that many people remained

slaves even when the legal became literal for them, when they knew they were free. They were so used to slavery that they were afraid to exercise their freedom. This may seem remarkable to us now, but the same holds true for how many people view their sins, circumstances, or unhealthy relationships. They stay bound by them simply because the idea of freedom frightens them. How they live legally is not how they live experientially.

SEEING JESUS AS HE REALLY IS

To live as an overcomer, you need to seek God's power and strength, relying on His grace to transform you and help you find the courage to pursue true spiritual and emotional freedom. You need to renew your mind with the truth of God's Word, allowing it to shape your thoughts and attitudes, overcoming negative thought patterns and the lies of the enemy that hold you back. You also need to follow God's will for your life in a way that honors Him and His kingdom agenda.

But to do all that, you also need to see Jesus for who He truly is. You need to see Him the way John saw Him. This Jesus in the book of Revelation isn't the One we tack onto Sunday school flannel boards or hang nice pictures of on the walls of our churches. No, this Jesus is on fire.

John writes in Revelation 1:13-17:

I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of

His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man.

This description of Jesus portrays Him as a powerful and majestic figure, radiating divine glory and kingdom authority. His posture and attributes indicate great wisdom, strength, and stability. John became so overwhelmed by this triumphant and exalted Lord that all he could do was fall at His feet.

So this is not the sissified Jesus so many shrug Him off as these days. Rather, this is King Jesus who rules over all. This is the Jesus who “disarmed the rulers and authorities, [making] a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:15). Jesus stripped Satan and his minions of all authority when He disarmed them at the cross and even led a victory parade in the spiritual realm. Jesus didn’t come to play; He secured our victory in His own.

That’s why time and time again Scripture tells us we can overcome through Christ’s overcoming power. We read this in multiple places, but here are three:

In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us (Romans 8:37).

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Romans 5:8-10).

Your ability to overcome is rooted and grounded in your relationship with Jesus Christ and His liberating power. On the cross, Jesus lifted the sins of the whole world and placed them on Himself. He took on the sin, pain, deceit, and destruction of it all and carried the burden.

Now, if a weight lifter can lift 700 pounds, you don't expect he'll have a problem lifting 200 pounds. Similarly, since Jesus took on the sins of the entire world on the cross, He won't have any problem helping you overcome whatever you're facing. No problem is too big for Jesus Christ. No addiction is too dug in that Jesus can't set you free. No circumstance or relationship is too far gone that He can't redeem it. He's already handled the whole world's sin and its accompanying circumstances.

Whatever you're facing may seem big to you, but know that it is not too big for Jesus. He can handle it. It's just that you may need to adjust which Jesus you're looking to for help. Are you looking to the Jesus the apostle John saw and wrote about in the book of Revelation? Are you looking to the Jesus who conquered Satan on the cross? Or are you looking to the Jesus our culture has dumbed down and gentled to fit inside a box of its own choosing?

If your view of Jesus is the correct view, then you'll know He can handle anything you're facing—plus a whole lot more. And when you tap into the power of the all-powerful One by viewing Jesus as who He truly is, you'll be able to do what John reveals he saw in a vision: “[The brethren] overcame [the accuser] because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death” (Revelation 12:11).

This one verse—as I'll show you next—can shift how you relate to Jesus. And when you do that, He shifts how He relates to you. By aligning yourself underneath Him, you access His care, covering, and power.

PREVAILING OVER THE ENEMY

The brethren John writes about in Revelation 12:11 prevailed over the enemy because of three actions they had in place, and we need to do the same three things.

1. Identify with Christ in Faith

When the people personally and publicly identified with Christ, they prevailed. See, God will often place victory in your reach, just not in your hand. Living as an overcomer is in your reach. You can have that life whenever you want. But you need to exercise faith in Christ in order to get it in your hand.

Now, talking about faith is not exercising faith. Praying about faith is good, but it's not exercising faith. Going to church is great, but it's not exercising faith either. To exercise faith in such a way that enables you to grab what God has to give requires identifying with Jesus Christ publicly through your walk and your talk, your life and your lips, your movement and your mouth. It's about your commitment and your confession.

In Galatians 2:20, Paul summarizes what this means not just for him but for all of us: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." To identify with Jesus Christ means that He is your current point of reference. If what Jesus did two thousand years ago is just a historical event for you, you will never benefit from His power, as you have the potential to do.

The reality of what Jesus accomplished on the cross is a present-day reality. The power He exhibited on the cross is a present-day power. When He said even before His death and rise, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18), He wasn't talking about only a specific point in time. The translation of His statement is simply, "I'm in charge now!" Jesus did not come to

take sides. He came to take over. He calls the shots. Thus, if you're not allowing Him to call the shots in your life—meaning you're making choices outside of His will and out from under His rule—you will not have access to His power and authority to overcome.

To identify with Jesus, then, is to identify with the power He displayed and the victory He secured on the cross.

2. Testify of Christ and His Lordship Publicly

We also see that the people overcame through the “word of their testimony.” They were bold enough to speak up. If you live as a spiritual secret-agent, CIA representative, you can't expect Christ's power to be accessible to you. You can forget about overcoming if you're too embarrassed to be associated with Jesus.

In Matthew 10:33 Jesus says, “Whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.” So if you don't want to be associated with Jesus publicly, if you're content with only a private meeting among saints on Sundays, then you have willingly given up Christ's power to overcome. Jesus is the all-powerful God. He decides whom He helps and when, and in part His decision rests in your relationship and public acknowledgment of Him.

Philippians 2:10 speaks of this testimony: “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” God receives glory when Jesus is proclaimed publicly.

Confessing Jesus publicly can to some degree be compared to a married person wearing a wedding ring. That ring is there to publicly declare that they have a legal and binding relationship with someone else. Now, you can be married and choose not to wear a wedding ring, if that's the only indication, so no one will know you're married, but I doubt your spouse will smile on that choice.

Lots of people who have married into the family of God as the bride of Jesus Christ don't want to wear His ring. They don't want other people to know they're bound to Jesus in a covenantal relationship.

And when it's not "safe" for them to be associated with Him, they say—like Peter did—"I don't know the man." Because of this choice, however, in Matthew 10:33 Jesus makes it clear that when they call on Him to act as Mediator between them and God the Father, He will deny that He knows them. As long as a Christian is a secret-agent saint, they won't be accessing or maximizing both the kingdom power and authority that is rightfully theirs through the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus declares that a person's willingness to confess Him becomes the marker of their seriousness about Him. This is much more than simply believing in God. After all, Satan believes in God. Alignment under the Lordship of Christ—putting Him in first place—involves publicly declaring and demonstrating an association with Him in both words and actions.

The question stands: If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you, or would you be found innocent of all charges? Again, Jesus makes a clear tie between His followers' public acknowledgment and confession of Him before men and His confession of us before the Father.

Now, keep in mind, Jesus doesn't say, "If you confess My Father before men, then I will confess you before Him." That's because it's easy for anyone to say they believe in God, to at least confess He exists. And people pour so many variant definitions into that one word that when it comes down to it, just saying "God" doesn't mean a whole lot anymore.

When you publicly confess Jesus Christ, however, everyone knows who you're talking about. The name Jesus is ultra specific. You're saying you believe in Him for eternal salvation, and you confess Him publicly for deliverance in history. Both His investment and His involvement in your life hinges on your public declaration through both your words and actions that He is Lord. As Paul boldly urged his protégé Timothy, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Timothy 1:8).

If for no other practical reason than accessing the power of deliverance on earth, you must establish and declare Jesus Christ as Lord in your life and over your world. You must open your mouth publicly and let others know through what you say—as well as what you do—that He is your Lord and Master, that you are not ashamed to be associated with Him and to live under Him. He is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenlies, as are you through His redemption on the cross. So access His power and authority through a public declaration of His Lordship in your life.

Furthermore, Jesus' blood has established the new covenant under which you are to align your life and world in order to receive its full covenantal covering and protection (Romans 12:11). You've probably heard someone say, "I plead the blood." They're talking about the blood of the covenant. The way you plead the blood of the covenant, however, is not by saying some supposedly magical words. You plead the blood of the covenant by being under the terms of the covenant—by making Jesus Christ Lord of your life and ruler of your world.

In Old Testament times, the Israelites couldn't just say, "I plead the blood." They had to place the blood of a slain animal on their doorposts in order to plead it. They had to align themselves within the protective confines of the walls that were connected to the blood-stained doors. Likewise, today there must be covenantal alignment under the Lordship and rulership of Jesus Christ in order to experience His kingdom power, authority, provision, and covering of an overcomer.

We read about this new covenant in these three places in the book of Hebrews:

Now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15).

And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24).

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the new covenant, the unique one-of-a-kind Mediator between heaven and earth (1 Timothy 2:5).

I have a master key to the church building where I pastor. A staff person who works here may have a key to their own office, or even to the section of the building their office is in, but they're limited in which doors they can open throughout the facility. But because I have a master key that works in any lock, I can go anywhere I want.

Too many of us aren't getting everywhere we need to go because we don't have the *Master key*. We go to church, hear a sermon, and receive a truth, giving us a key for a certain room in our Christian lives, but the key to the Christian life as a whole is making Jesus Christ our Lord and Master. The ability to live victoriously and advance God's kingdom agenda on earth—in our churches, in our communities, and around the world—comes through this unique Master key called the Lordship of Christ.

And only as the Lordship of Jesus Christ is reflected through His people individually and corporately will the world experience the rule of God as the Creator intended it to be. Only as the Lordship of Jesus Christ is reflected through your life individually will you tap into the overcoming power and authority that is His to supply.*

* The content in this chapter beginning with the paragraph "Confessing Jesus publicly" is adapted with permission from Tony Evans, *The Kingdom Agenda* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2013).

3. Be Willing to Sacrifice All for Christ

The third thing Romans 12:11 reveals we must do to overcome is seek a relationship with Jesus that transcends even death—and in more than one kind of death. The verse says, “They did not love their life even when faced with death.” Many of the early church believers had to make this third aspect real in their lives physically. But we’re also called to a daily death. This is what Paul was talking about when he said he “died daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). And it’s what Jesus meant in Luke 9:23 when He said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.” These believers’ commitment to Christ, then, was so strong that they were willing to sacrifice their own wants and desires as well as their lives in order to demonstrate it.

In our culture today, our physical lives aren’t often threatened for following Jesus, but the principle remains true. We should be willing to sacrifice our wants and desires to demonstrate our commitment to Christ, at a minimum. In doing so, we will discover the overcoming power of His relationship with us.

Jesus is to be the sum total of your existence, and when you view Him as your Source and sole provider for all things—not just material needs, but also your emotional, spiritual, and any other needs—then making these commitments to Him will come easy. Living as an overcomer is all about a close and abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. And we’ll discover more about this in Part Two of this book, diving more deeply into studying the seven churches Jesus addresses in the book of Revelation.